

DOCUMENTING PEOPLE ON THE MARGINS



“We too are humans.”

Acknowledgements

Copy Editor: Farhana Alam, Dia Alam, Tasfiah Jalil

Photography Course Instructor: Shehzad Noorani

Photography Course Field Coordinator: Bashir Ahmed Sujan

Additional Data Collection: Raju Ahmmed

Designer: Syed Latif Hossain, Ariful Islam, Tanvir Hassan

Printer: Progressive Printers

CONTENTS

Note From The Dean , <i>Professor Sabina Faiz Rashid</i>	6
Documenting People On The Margins: A Photography Workshop on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) , <i>Tasfiah Jalil</i>	8
Foreward , <i>Shehzad Noorani</i>	10
People Living with HIV	
Life In Progress: Living with HIV , <i>Faiham Ebna Sharif</i>	14
Conversations in Silence , <i>Mumit Mahbub</i>	22
To Be Positive , <i>Snigdha Zaman</i>	34
The Bede Community	
Bird of Passage , <i>Nayeem Tushar</i>	44
Wandering Life , <i>Momo Mustafa</i>	50
Commercial Sex Workers	
Trapped Voices , <i>Md. Akhlas Uddin</i>	60
Living in Banishanta , <i>Kiron Khan</i>	66
Caged Bird , <i>A.N.M. Zia</i>	72
Risky Sexual Behaviour	
Garden Of Cocoons , <i>Sayed Latif Hossain</i>	82
The Hijra Community	
Reclaiming Identity , <i>Hasan Bipul</i>	98
Cocooned Life , <i>Humaria Sultana</i>	104
A Beautiful Rose Made of Paper , <i>K. U. Masoud</i>	112
<i>Photographers' Profile</i>	121

Note from the Dean

Professor Sabina Faiz Rashid

Dean & Director of the Centre of Excellence for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (CGSRHR)

BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University

It is a pleasure to publish this book from the Centre of Excellence for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (CGSRHR), BRAC James P. Grant School of Public Health at BRAC University. At the Centre, we focus on research, policy, advocacy, and training activities on gender, sexual and reproductive health, and sexuality and rights in Bangladesh and in the region. We are committed to promoting a broad-based understanding of these critical yet sensitive issues which focus on vulnerable groups and young people.

We introduced the photography course, “Documenting People on the Margins: A Photography Course on SRHR,” specifically for photographers who wanted to further develop their skills in documentary photography, focusing on the lives of marginalised communities. In 2017, fifteen photographers were selected and they met with people living with HIV/AIDS, people from the Hijra community, commercial sex workers, and members of the Bede community. With this book, we hope to bring in a different perspective to the stories of such marginalised communities; to be

able to empathise and feel compassion without portraying them as victims. It is important that photographers who document such disenfranchised peoples are cognizant of how their photos and actions could affect those involved, especially in cases where the identity of the person must be protected and remain anonymous.

This initiative was taken as an initial first step to advocate for the sexual and reproductive rights of marginalised communities. Through this photography workshop, 15 photographers were given

the rare opportunity to travel throughout the country to meet with diverse communities and have personal interactions with individuals who shared intimate details of their lives. By revealing their stories to the world, this book, hopes to address the stigma, shame, and misrepresentations that adversely impact on these marginalized communities.

Documenting People On The Margins: Photography Workshops on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

Tasfiah Jalil

Coordinator, NUFFIC Grant

The Centre for Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (CGSRHR) at the BRAC James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, with the support of the Dutch government through the Netherlands Initiative for Capacity Development in Higher Education grant funded by NUFFIC (The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs organisation for Internationalisation in Education), took the initiative of capacity-building on gender and SRHR for professionals across the public and private sectors of Bangladesh. During the five years of the NUFFIC grant, CGSRHR conducted two unique photography workshops in April 2016 and March 2017, with a total of 27 promising photographers, where they took a closer look through the SRHR lens at the lives of people from vulnerable and marginalized communities living in Bangladesh. Through this workshop, the photographers received a broad-based understanding of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and honed their skills on documentary

photography by collecting narratives for presenting through storytelling. The main instructor for the course was Shehzad Noorani, an acclaimed international documentary photographer, and was co-instructed by Bashir Ahmed Sujon, a renowned documentary photographer of Bangladesh. My colleague Farhana Alam (Coordinator, Breaking the Shame project) and I, jointly organized and facilitated the workshops.

The 15-day workshop was a learning opportunity for photographers to witness real-life struggles and challenges of the *Hijra* community (transgender or intersex people who decide to join a certain community), commercial sex workers, members of the *Bede* community and people living with HIV, who are most often stigmatized and misrepresented. The first three days of the session were held in the classroom, while the next 10 days were in the field, with mentors assigned to each photographer. The

remaining two days were spent editing and developing the photos and stories brought back by the photographers. The 10 days spent in the field was the heart of the course, where the photographers were divided into groups and taken all over Bangladesh, to spend time with these selected communities. They were taken to brothels - both small and large, spent days on boats of the *Bede* people, lived with the hijra community, visited the homes of people and families who are living with HIV and spoke to people who are involved in risky sexual behavior. For the first couple of days, the photographers were instructed not to take any photos, and instead, spend their time with community members and try to understand the way these people live their lives, the feelings and emotions they undergo in various situations, and their everyday struggle. As they listened to their stories, they began to identify with the humane side of their lives and eventually they started taking photographs that went on to become a part of their photo-narratives. During

this time, the two instructors Shehzad and Sujana acted as mentors and constantly provided feedback to the photographers. The aim was to portray the lives in a respectful manner and not to follow the usual misrepresentation of victim-hood and tragedy. The fact that choice was also an element for many owing to their sexuality was unearthed.

For ethical consideration, the photographers explained the purpose of their workshop to their subjects and informed them of a possible publication of these photos; only those who consented in writing that the photographs can be published for noncommercial purposes both by the photographers and the School were photographed. In addition, the names of the individuals have been changed to protect their identities.

Foreward

Shehzad Noorani, Documentary Photographer

Photography Course Instructor

The word ‘photography’ originates from Greek, which literally means, “to draw with light.” Almost anyone can do it, now more than ever with the rise of smart phone cameras. However, only those who have mastered the art of photography, truly have the ability to use light to create images that communicate.

Some believe photographs tell the truth. I, however, believe photos can just as well manipulate and distort the truth. Photography can be used to help promote tolerance and humanity, but at the same time, it can be used to promote its opposite values.

In today’s world, the idea that photography helps promote only the truth is rapidly changing. The faith placed in media and the

tools it uses, is slowly diminishing, and so, it is important that photography - a powerful tool - belongs to those who desire to tell the truth. Taking photographs gives the person behind the camera, immense power. But, with this, comes responsibilities.

The idea behind the photography course, ‘Documenting People on the Margins,’ was not to teach, but, to get together a group of people who see and capture light, and help them focus their lens on marginalised communities who live within our society. We found 15 Bangladeshi photographers, both male and female, and introduced them to these groups through lectures, discussions, and field visits.

We invited experts who work with people living with HIV, members from the "*Bede*" community, "*Hijras*", and commercial sex workers who live in brothels. We discussed the specific challenges one faces when working with such groups and how to document their daily lives in ways that shed light on their realities and help dispel misconceptions. In addition, we discussed the importance of knowing when to raise the camera, when to shoot, and most importantly, when to refrain.

Our photographers travelled all over the country: from major cities like Dhaka and Chittagong to remote villages and islands like Banishanta, and in the end, they brought back powerful, in-depth

stories, which are now presented in this book.

I am extremely proud of the work produced by our fellow photographers. I am also grateful for the opportunity given to me by the BRAC James P. Grant School of Public Health, to share the experience with these students and also to learn from them.

Life in Progress: Living with HIV

Faiham Ebna Sharif

Public health concerns in the post-colonial countries has an international dimension and is often connected with national security. Though a public health issue, HIV/AIDS has a slightly different connection with security, disease, and commerce. In a country like Bangladesh, it is different than other newly emerged nation states. Though a secular state by constitution, Bangladesh, by having a Muslim majority population, offsets many of the risks of spreading HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, migrant workers infected by HIV/AIDS and the prevalent stigma and discrimination by the society toward people living with HIV/AIDS pose potential threats to the among the high risk population by the spread of HIV.

Jahir Uddin, (pseudonym) returned from UAE in 2002 and got married the next year. In 2008, his wife was diagnosed HIV positive as the couple were expecting their third child. Her physician found it was Jahir from whom his wife and their two children got

infected with HIV. After talking to Jahir, it was revealed that he became HIV positive through sexual exposure during his stay in the UAE. After receiving treatment and following the physician's advice, his youngest child was born HIV negative. He is now 11 years old and studying in grade 4.

This is one case story which can be replicated with many others among the 9,600 HIV infected people in the country, as per UNAIDS data 2015. It also shows, how women and children are pushed among the high risk group because of the social phenomenon. HIV/AIDS constitutes a global security threat for human being. So, preventing further spread of HIV/AIDS requires a more thorough understanding of issues such as intimacy, cultural expectations and interpersonal relationships. In this regard, people who are living with HIV/AIDS have already won a war, which remains unrecognised. a great and peaceful war of our time and remain unrecognized.



কাউন্সেলর
Counselor









Jahanara Begum, 36, cooks in her smoke-filled, derelict kitchen. Her husband is unemployed, hence, they do not have enough money to repair their house. She cannot use the adjacent kitchen as her in-laws maintain a physical distance for fear of catching her disease. Begum contracted the HIV virus from her husband, which has also infected their three children. She is currently under Anti-Retroviral Therapy.



Ajir Ahmed, 14, cycles back from school where he studies in the sixth grade. He enjoys studying most subjects, except for English and Mathematics. He loves to play football and cricket but often feels physically exhausted compared to his other friends. He is HIV positive and is currently receiving the Anti-Retroviral Therapy.



Tanim Ahmed, 11, is preparing to go to the mosque for Jummah prayers, a weekly prayer for Muslims. He studies in the fourth grade, and sometimes has to skip classes to help his father who is an HIV patient. Both his siblings, as well as his mother, are also infected with the virus, and are required to take their medications on a daily basis. Not fully aware of his family's condition, Tanim often wonders why his siblings do not share their medicine with him, when they share everything else.



Conversations in Silence

Mumit Mahbub

Rajib (Pseudonym): Let's take a walk.

Mumit: Why?

(Moment of silence)

Rajib: My brother's fiancée's family will be arriving shortly.

Mumit: We can wait

Rajib: No, no. If they see a photographer has come to take photos of my family, it may draw unwarranted attention.

So, I walked with him, his wife and children, and we went down to the river. No one else was there while I took photos; nobody from the village can ever find out that Rajib is an HIV patient. His wife, as well as one of their three children, are both infected.

Rajib, who is a recently returned migrant worker from Saudi Arabia, unintentionally infected his wife with the HIV virus. In almost all cases, male migrant workers like him, contract the virus during their stay in the Middle East. I asked him how he got infected; he simply replied back, "contraceptives are banned in Saudi Arabia." Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia are required

to take regular mandatory HIV tests and are forced to leave the country when the test results come back positive. When they return to Bangladesh, they face further discrimination back in their villages, due to the general lack of knowledge of the infection. Although many people know of the HIV virus or of AIDS, their knowledge is limited when it comes to understanding how the virus can be transmitted and how to protect themselves from infection. As a result, HIV patients are often discriminated and are removed from having daily contact with members of their community, for fear of getting infected or "catching the disease." as they call it.

Another young male, who was HIV infected, dropped me off at the bus terminal. On our way there, he told me about the things he lost due to his illness- his aspirations, his love, and with it, part of his soul. The list probably would have stretched longer, had he not held back his tears. There was a long, silent pause, and I just stood there, unable to fathom or relate to his experiences; I truly felt helpless.

















On my way back home, I got on the bus and met a young migrant boy who was travelling to the Middle East for work. Hearing him talk about his future with excitement in his voice, reminded me of Rajib who went there with similar dreams, but, lost everything in the process. Instead of bidding farewell and wishing him well on his future journey, I found myself leaning in and whispering to him, "be careful." Feeling surprised, he kept on staring at me. There was a long period of silence.

While most people like Rajib hope for a brighter future, where people will learn to be tolerant and be accepting towards those living with HIV, they continue to live in secrecy and in isolation. Few, however, respond with courage. Another couple, Asha and Mamun, both HIV positive, are currently working to build awareness on HIV/AIDS. They challenge the constraints set by the society, but unlike most, they refuse to stay in hiding and continue to live an active social life.



To be Positive...

Snigdha Zaman

Chondona's Story

“After my marriage, my sister-in-law told me not to use my husband’s plate and glass. I was not allowed to sleep with my husband. They even asked me not to conceive, in case I contract my husband’s disease, which will kill both me and the baby. I felt suffocated in fear and had suicidal thoughts.” Chondona Das describes her post-marital situation with tears in her eyes. Her husband, Iswar Das, has been HIV positive for the last twelve years; his first wife died from AIDS, and his son from the first marriage lives with the infection as well. Iswar Das is currently receiving treatment from Ashar Alo Society and now lives a healthy life.

“My wife Chondona and our second son are negative. Now, my family members and neighbours understand that HIV does not spread by touch. They come to our home and eat food with us.” Chondona’s family, however, still does not now know of Iswar’s condition and she does not want them to know for fear of ex-communication.

Jhorna's Story

Jhorna Begum’s husband, a bus conductor named Moti, intentionally infected her with the HIV virus, to prevent Jhorna from leaving him once she learned of his condition. Jhorna is now pregnant for the second time and is terrified of having a baby HIV positive, despite both husband and wife being treated at Ashar Alo. When Jhorna was first tested positive, her first-born Jui was only two years old and was still being breast-fed: luckily, Jui was tested negative.

“On one hand, I am worried about this unplanned pregnancy, (my husband refuses to wear condoms), on the other, I can’t even share my difficult situation with anyone from my family, because, I am afraid once they know, they may abandon us. One of my sisters lives nearby, but, she doesn’t know anything about my disease,” said Jhorna with grief. This neighbourhood is important to Jhorna because while her husband is out of the city for work, Jhorna spends most of her time at home alone with her daughter.



Momtaz's Story

Momotaz Begum, a retired sex worker, is living with HIV. She is outspoken about her way of life and hopes to create awareness about the infection. “Once I found out I was HIV positive, I was frightened and anxious, thinking I was going to die soon. People of Ashar Alo helped me understand how I can live a healthy life with this infection. Another shock came from the leaders of my brothel, when they forced me to leave, but, I managed to accept that as well. I also stopped receiving clients once I knew of my infection and learnt how it can be transmitted. By now, everyone in my neighbourhood knows of me, but nobody hates me.” Momotaz, however, is deeply concerned with her blood sugar level as she is diabetic. “The only thing breaking me is my

diabetes, my kidneys are already affected and I do not have a source of income to help pay for my medication.”

Quoting the photographer: “Like many others, I was also fearful of the infection and thought it was best to never go near an HIV patient. However, after spending my days under the hospitality and kindness from Chondona Das, Jhorna Begum, and Momotaz Begum, my attitude towards the HIV infected people changed, and for the better. To hear Momotaz be more worried about her being diabetic than having HIV, made me realize that while it is definitely possible to contain and manage the virus, other diseases such as diabetes or cancer, can make life more painful, difficult, and sometimes life-threatening.”



MRC
Batch - 17









THE BEDE COMMUNITY

Bird of Passage

Nayeem Tushar

The *Bede* people of Bangladesh are an indigenous community known for their nomadic lifestyle; they move from one place to the next and spend most of their time living on boats. From my visits, I learned that *Bede* people embrace this way of life; they call themselves by the term '*Manta*' and '*Gail*' for those who are outside of their community. The capital for the *Bede* community is at Mawa, in Kharisha. In Kharisha, over 90 per cent of the homes are locked shut and the entire village remains empty for almost 11 months out of the year. When the Eid holidays come around, the *Bede* people return home and stay for 15-20 days, during which, several religious and social events take place, such as circumcisions, and weddings.

A survey by Gram Bangla Unnayan Porishod, shows that there are around 8,00,000 *Bede* people living in Bangladesh. Amongst them, a small number of *Bede* members who are able to save up, manage to buy land and build permanent houses. *Bede* people mostly live in small groups; those who live in remote areas are in relatively vulnerable conditions compared to those who live in a more urban environment. Since most of them do not settle in one specific place, they are unable to admit their children to local schools.











Wandering Life

Momo Mustafa

Bede women are very active and are often the primary earning member of the family. That is why young girls are more accepted by their community than boys. *Bede* men usually stay at home and remain unemployed. These days, however, some *Bede* men have started to work, since one individual's income is not sufficient for the entire family.

For decades, the *Bede* people's professions include snake charming, selling herbal medicine, and involving themselves in entertainment services such as magic shows. There are 7-8 subsections of the *Bede* community based on the kind of work they do. People who are from the fishermen community are called '*Bebaijja*'. I spoke to Rahima (45), a member of this group who told me that '*Bebaijja*' women often beat their husbands, which is common in their culture, which I found to be quite surprising. Another tradition in their community also struck me as somewhat different: *Bede* men have to give money and jewellery to the bride's father in order to receive permission for getting married.

Although women are the dominant partners in their marriages or supporting the household, it is rare that they will have female group leaders in their community. However, the chief of the village or the group leaders are almost always men.

There is a common misconception that *Bede* women work as commercial sex workers. During my discussion with several *Bede* women, they admitted to having multiple partners and relationships, but they have never considered commercial sex work as a source of income.

Some pregnant *Bede* women are reluctant to vaccinate their children after they are born, despite receiving information of its benefits. The *Bede* people primarily rely on plants and amulets to help cure illnesses. It is community also common for *Bede* men to have multiple wives. As a result, *Bede* women often take turns nurturing children who belong to other wives.















COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS

Trapped Voices

Md. Akhlas Uddin

“We have the right to live. We did not come here voluntarily; they (brothel-keepers), took advantage of our destitute conditions, gave us false hopes and promises of a steady, solvent job at a garments factory. Then, they brought us here and trapped us. We can no longer leave; we cannot get out.”

These are the voices of female sex workers living in the brothels situated in Tangail and Faridpur. Most of these women are trafficked while others may have been born inside these brothels, forever chained to a life of selling sex to men.

One of them was tricked into prostitution by her own sister; another was brought in by her sister-in-law; and another, by her husband forcing his wife to sell her body to other men. The most vulnerable stage is when a young female is introduced at a tender age to these brothels and she begins as a '*Badha Meye*', a 'bonded girl.'

Prostitution is legal in Bangladesh and officially, it is required for sex workers to be at least 18 years of age, but, most of them begin underaged, usually between 12-15 years old. The brothel keepers forge signatures of these underage girls to make fake registrations where their age is listed as 20 years of age or older.

Female sex workers are not free; all of them belong to the forewoman or “madam.” At least for one year, these girls must work under the supervision of the madam who usually purchases these girls from sex traffickers. A lot of these bonded sex workers told me they continue to support their families financially with whatever they manage to earn. Most of them lie to their families and pretend that the money is coming from a job at a garments manufacturing factory.





Most of the time, once a girl is established, learns the trade, and has saved enough to pay off the madam, the amount they were purchased for, she starts her own independent business. She rents a room of her own in the brothel and takes clients at her own will. Eventually, she herself purchases '*Badha Meye*', assumes the role of the madam, and thus, this cycle continues.

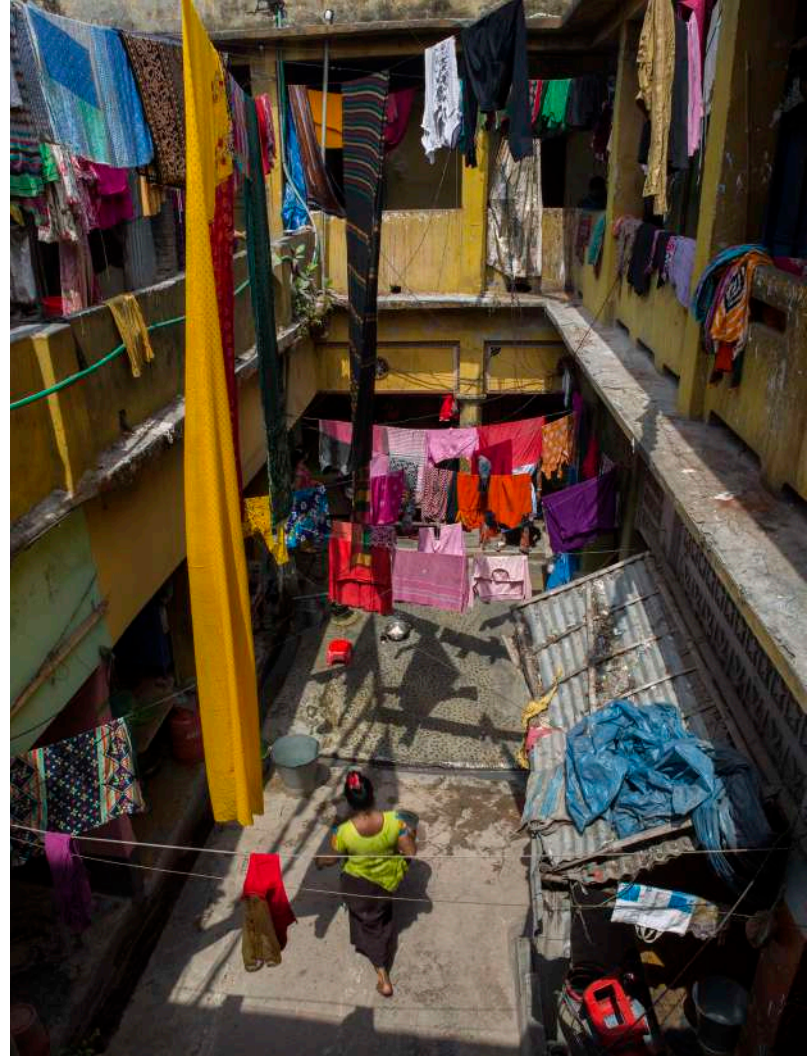
Sex workers living in brothels are not able to save most of their earnings. Their time for doing business is only a few years, maybe up to 22-23 years of age, as long as they can hold on to

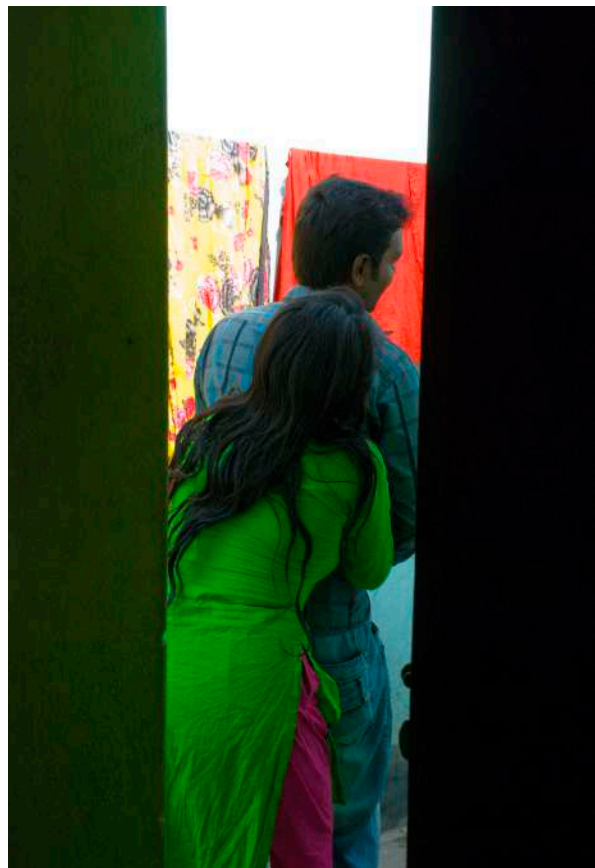
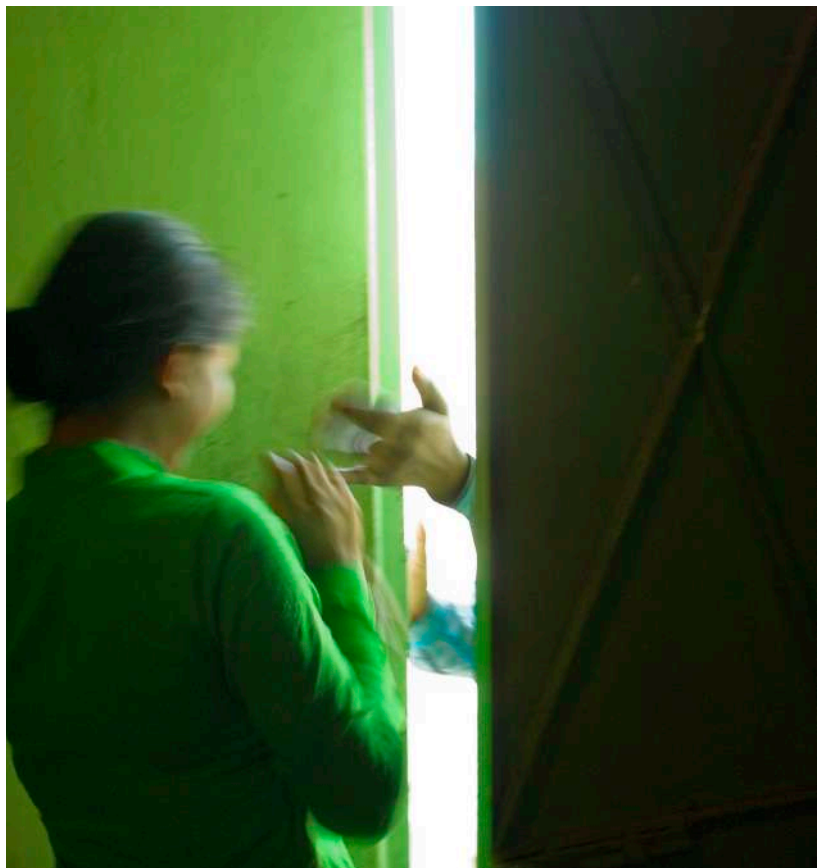
their youth and beauty until new, younger girls arrive at the brothel. As they earn in their younger days, they do not save much for the future as they are often uninformed of ways to save up, and they do not trust anybody else with their money for fear of being cheated. They also spend a lot on themselves and on their "*Babu*" which roughly translates to, "master.". As they age, their demand slowly goes down, and some of them try to set up their own business, so they can save up for eventual retirement.

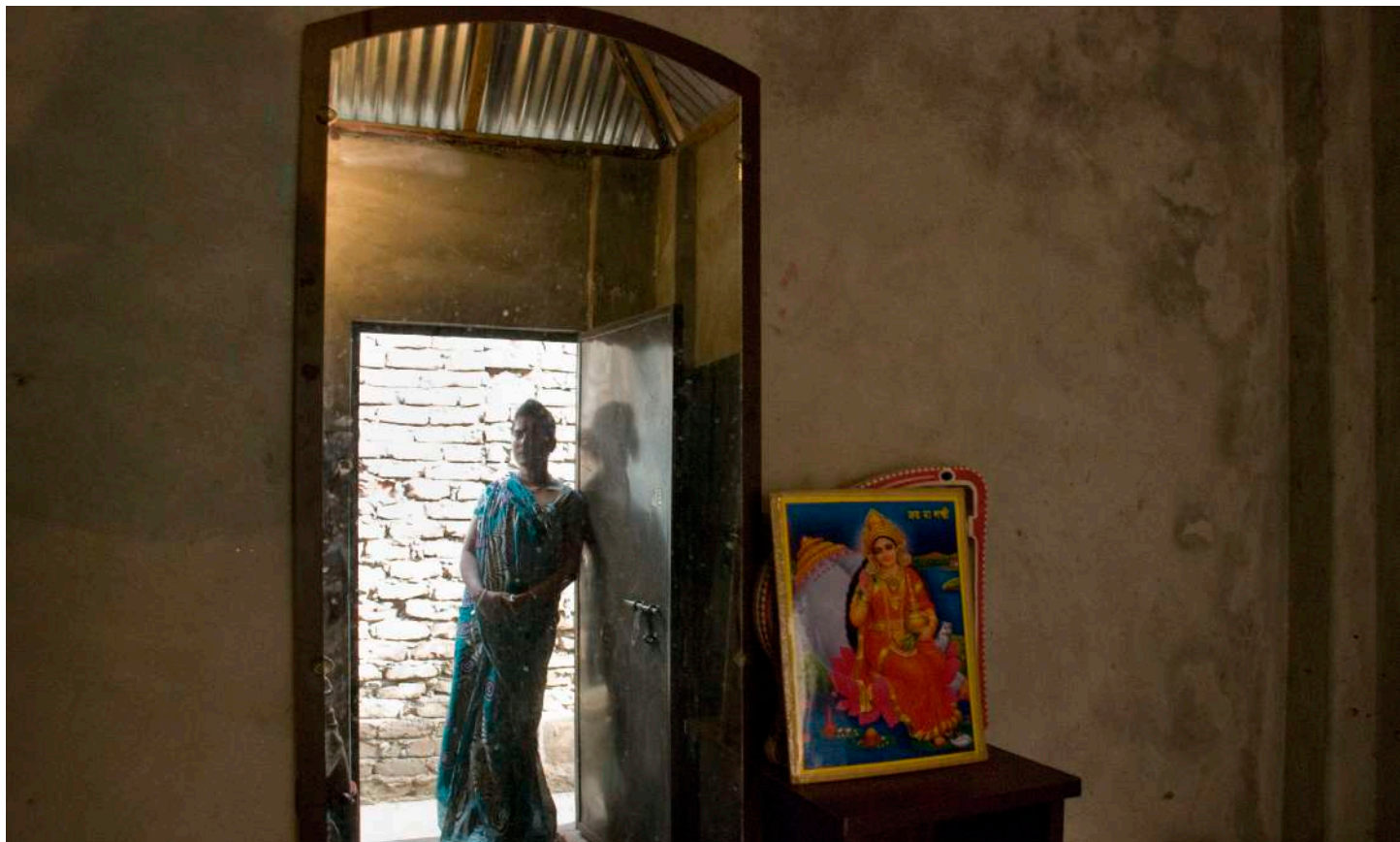


In old age, sex workers often tend to live a difficult life if they have not set up their own trade. Most of them have children who are kept outside of these brothels, who need constant care, which is often done through hired help.

Fearful of their families or children learning the truth, they did not want to reveal their faces.







Living in Banishanta

Kiron Khan

The Banishanta brothel is more like a village, as it is one of the oldest brothels in Bangladesh. It is situated on the banks of the Posur River, near Mongla port, which draws in international cargo ships. A lot of the crew members would come off their ships and stay for the night at the brothel. Some of the girls who work in the Banishanta brothel say that sometimes customers choose not to wear condoms and, as a result, they get pregnant. During my visit to the brothel, I found three women who were pregnant; one was almost eight months in. Early into the pregnancy, she used to ask her clients not to put their weight on her, but, now, being nearly eight months in, she is unable to have sexual intercourse, but she still takes in clients and performs other sexual acts, so she can pay her bills and save up money to support her soon-to-be newborn.

Most of these sex workers wish to have a husband or a partner with whom they can build a life outside of the brothel. In the search for

finding such a partner, they often fall in love with their regular, fixed client, with whom they dream of a new life, and spend their time together as a couple. They call this client, their “*Babu*,” which roughly translates to, “master.”

The women often spend a significant portion of their earnings on this particular client, they invest financially in him and in return, they get to play out their desires of living a domestic life with a partner. They keep a separate set of clothes for their *Babu*, which they do not share with other clients. The wealthier sex workers, often have separate beds made for their *Babu*. They do not entertain other clients during the times their *babu* comes to visit. Unfortunately, these women are often tricked by their *Babus*, who leave with their money while leading them on with empty promises of a happy home away from life in a brothel. This dream is never fulfilled and yet, it continues to live in the hearts of these women.











Caged Bird

A.N.M. Zia

This series of photos were taken at country-side brothels situated in Faridpur, Jessore, and Mongla regions of Bangladesh, each with their own story to tell. A short visit to these brothels revealed the extreme hardships that sex workers have to endure on a daily basis. One girl managed to escape the brothel once, only to find herself making her way back once she learned that it was her own father who sold her off as a prostitute. She was forced to make a choice between two extremes, either commit suicide or continue working at the brothel; she chose the latter.

Some of these sex workers often find themselves trapped in their line of work, either they are forced or are mentally tortured into working as sex workers by sex traffickers and brothel keepers, in

addition, they face discrimination outside of the brothel. Some have been living and working at these brothels for decades, rearing children who are born from working with clients who force them to engage in unprotected sex. Living in narrow, cramped spaces, often times, these women continue to serve their clients in the same room with their children, using only a curtain to separate them.

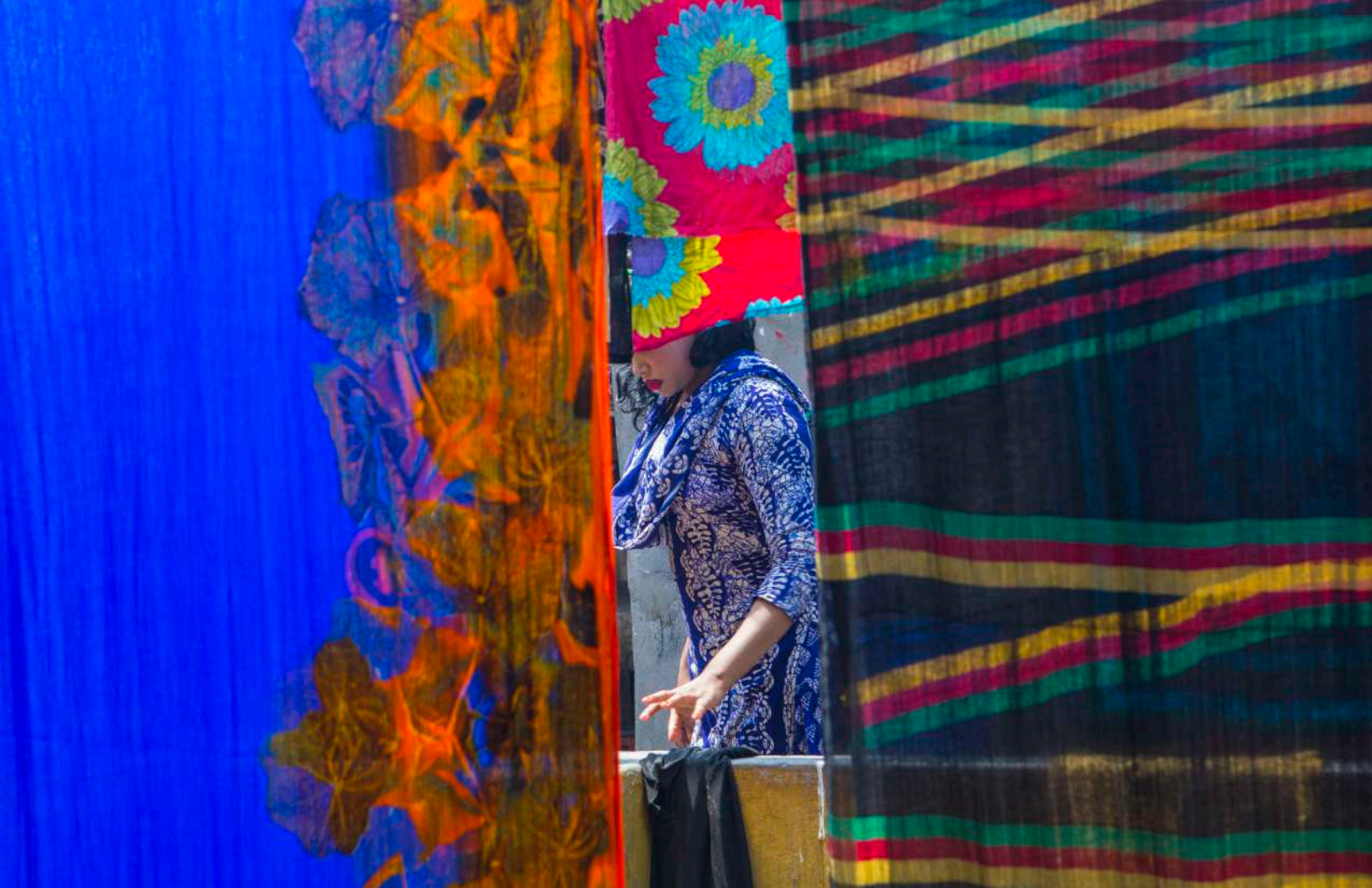
Most of these women are victims; who were tricked or forced into this line of work; in most cases, they are sold out by their family members, boyfriends, husbands, or in-laws. Living through these traumatic instances of betrayal and possible sexual trauma, most of them become depressed and with no hope of escape.















RISKY SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Garden Of Cocoons

Sayed Latif Hossain

Rows of huddling shacks, decrepit structures, intricate maze of narrow muddy alleys and throngs of people are what you would see in Bhashantek – one of the largest slums, situated near the Military Cantonment in Mirpur, in Dhaka city. Inhabitants are mostly migrant workers, coming from all over the country, with families having members of all age groups. Despite a serious lack of basic amenities like electricity, water and sanitation, and fragile structures, the rent of a house, per square foot, is a few times more than it is in ‘elite areas’ of this town. Here, the shanties huddle closer than the neighbors who are strangers to each other. Socialisation is done in starkly obvious separated groups under tacit rules. Only women would sit with women, men with men, girls with girls and boys with boys. That is the norm of the slum under the watchful eyes of interspersed mosques, madrassas and ‘*Murubbi*’ (elders/guardians). While women can make visit one another within the neighbourhood, the men can only know about a neighbor household through their windows or curious peepholes. ‘Minding one’s own business’ is a natural way of life though for the people struggling to make a living and balance a life as humanely as possible under such a scenario.

Adolescents and youths face yet another challenge typical of their age. Ratan (not his real name) is 23 years old. Though his small stature and skinny structure would suggest that he is 19. Being bullied throughout his childhood and adolescence, he preferred cow herding and fishing over going to school. Among five daughters and two sons to his parents, he is the fifth child and oldest among the boys. Meaning, he’s got one brother and a sister younger to him.

His father, a farmer by profession, came to Dhaka when Ratan was about 7 years old and left after a few months. However, at one point of time, the family moved to Dhaka for the education of the youngest two children. The mother stayed with the children in Dhaka while the father remained an occasional visitor. Having some cultivatable lands of his own, he was sort of a spendthrift according to Ratan.

While the youngest two continued their studies, Ratan engaged in menial labour. A couple of years back, he ‘liked’ a girl – a next-door neighbor. Although the girl’s family liked him and treated him almost like a family member, he was shamed by them when



৪-২৯

মুকতী সৈয়দ মুহাম্মাদ ফয়জুল করীম
আল্লামা নূরুল হুদা ফয়েজী

শিউরুল
শিউরুল

শিউরুল
শিউরুল



they ‘sensed’ his ‘ill intentions’ towards their girl. Ratan became a social recluse for more than six months. However, he continued to go to work somehow to heal his wounded heart, and, in the long run, he ended up having a few ‘clandestine relationships’ leading to having multiple sex partners and occasional visits to commercial sex workers. He has had some experiences of unprotected sex. ‘In the heat of the moment, I didn’t think of anything else,’ he says.

In his own words, “প্রেম, ভালোবাসা, সেক্স এইগুলো তো ক্ষিদার লাহান, তিয়াসের লাহান। খাওনের মতোই প্রয়োজন। ক্ষিদা লাগলে তিয়াস লাগলে মিডান

লাগে।” – “love, loving someone, sex, all these are like hunger, like thirst. A need like food. Hunger and thirst need to be satiated.”

“যদি জানতাম এমন অবস্থা অইবো, তাইলে লেহাপড়াডা জুর কইরাই করতাম। উকিল, অফিসার কত কিসুই তো হওন যাইতো।” – “If I had known I would end up like this, I would have forced myself to be educated. I could become a lawyer or an officer or so many other things like that.”

Ratan, is just one of many like him living in their own isolated cocoons in this slum of thousands of households spanning almost about 100 acres. Their stories are many and equally varied.



For example a ‘*Tempo*’ (a type of local passenger vehicle) driver and a father of two who would go after ‘an easy occasional partner’ while trying his best to provide for his wife and children.

When majority of the slum-dwellers are outside, at work, the slum assumes an eerie air during the empty noon and afternoons, bringing an opportunity for some of the young ones, back from schools or colleges, of clandestine, and sometimes very brief, rendezvous. Risky sexual behavior is not a disease as much as it is a symptom of a disease graver than we perceive. What is needed for them is empathy not pity, understanding not stigma, and

inclusiveness not isolation. These are the people we often look at with raised brows due to our stereotypical idea of them while they are more human than we can ever perceive. They are people with love, a sense of self-respect, with sense of responsibility; more than our eyes meet. These very humane attributes diminish in a non conducive or an antagonistic environment.



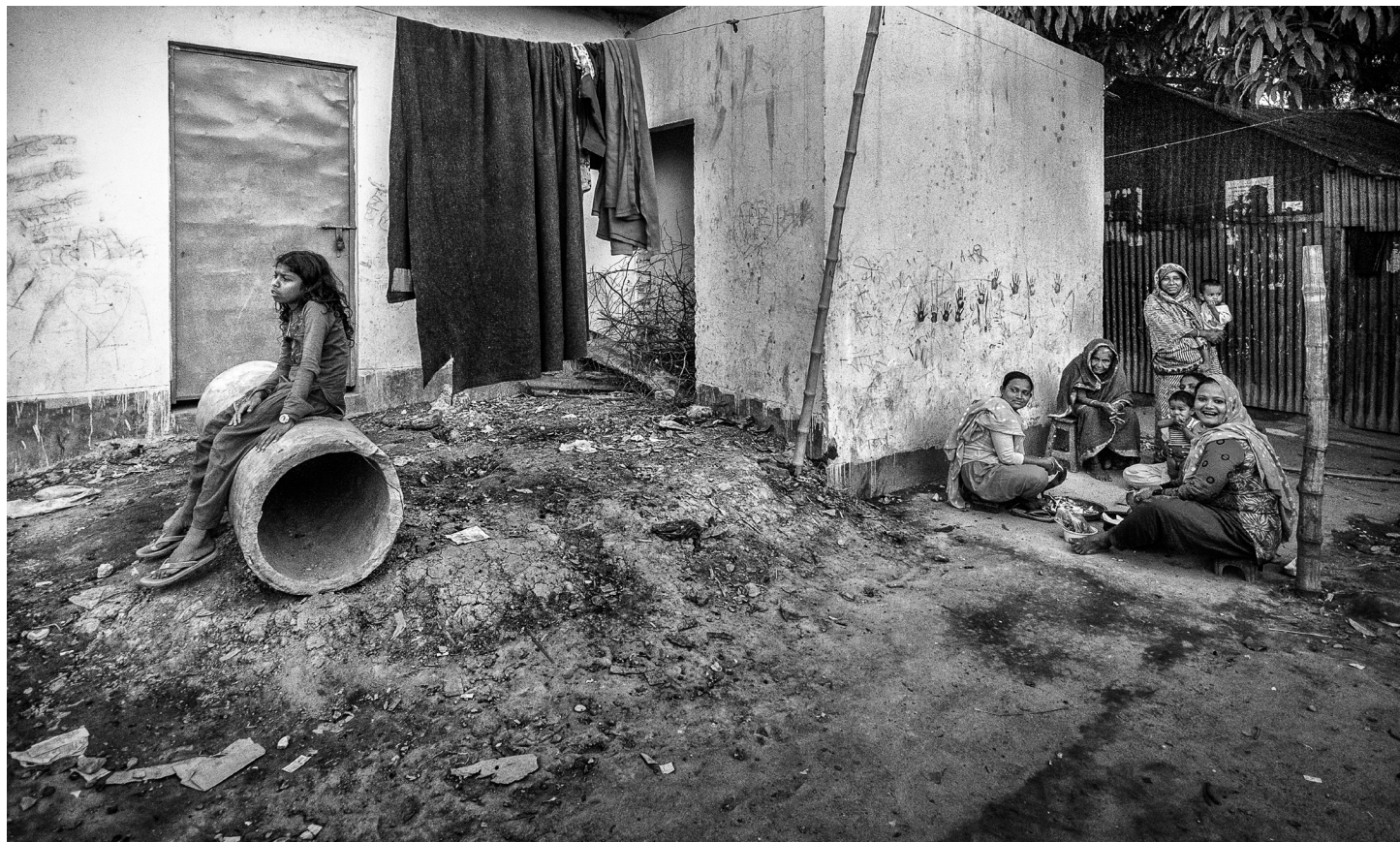
















THE HIJRA COMMUNITY

Reclaiming Identity

Hasan Bipul

“It was a room at the back of a medicine store in Jessore. It was where most *Hijras* would go for the surgery. The better option would be to get it done in India but, I did not have enough money. So, in that small, dingy and dimly lit room was my only option and path to becoming a woman. No anaesthesia was administered, and nothing was sanitary; everything was dirty, including the man who performed the procedure. I know it was not legitimate, but I had to do it. I could no longer continue living my life as a man, not anymore,” said Shammi. I met her at her friend’s house in Savar.

“After the surgery, on my way back to Dhaka, I felt pain around my genitalia as I was sitting on the bus, but I tried not to get worried. The man who performed by procedure said the pain was normal and that it would go away after a few days.”

Shammi’s pain, however, did not subside; it increased to the point where it became excruciating for her. Two days had passed and she was not able to urinate; the man who performed the surgery, did not leave an opening for her and instead, he stitched the entire orifice shut.





“I was supposed to go back to him to get it fixed but, I was unable to; the pain was so unbearable, that I almost fainted at the slightest touch. With it hurting so badly, how was it possible for me to withstand an entire bus ride all the way to Jessore?”

So, all alone and with no one to help, Shammi took a sharp toothpick and ripped open the stitches herself.

I asked her why she went through such a painful, risky, and traumatic procedure. She then replied with absolute conviction: “I was a woman living in a man’s body. I no longer wanted to have

dual identities- in fact, I feel I did not even have an identity back then. I wanted to be a woman, both in mind and body.” Shammi has found her place in the hijra community now.

This kind of surgery is common among members of the hijra community. Although Shammi has lost her sex drive after the procedure, she feels she connects with her body now more than ever before. Despite the physical and mental pain she has had to go through, Shammi is now content to be able to express her true identity.







Cocooned Life

Humaria Sultana

Meghla's Story:

Meghla and Akash are partners and they live happily together in their one-room residence for over three years. To describe their love, a close friend and neighbour named Shanti teased them saying, “Both of them are like lovebirds, and Meghla is a drama queen!” Meghla was smiling as Shanti kept talking. Akash’s family are yet to accept their relationship, although they call and talk to him regularly over the phone. Meghla, a *Hijra*, hopes one day everyone will understand and accept them for who they are. She does not work and is financially dependent on Akash. Both are incredibly happy and fulfilled with the love they have for one another.

Nupur's Story:

Nupur, a member of the *Hijra* community, was around 20 years old when she first saw Arif at a wedding. Her heart skipped a beat, and she immediately knew she found the man of her dreams. Nupur was performing as a dancer at the wedding reception but, her heart and mind were set on Arif. After her performance, she could not help but approach him and take down his contact information. Arif used to work at a hotel and Nupur started visiting almost every day just to see him, even if it was for a moment. Eventually, both expressed how they felt for each other and shortly after, they got married in court. It has been seventeen years since, and Nupur is still happily married to Arif; they do not have any children of their own, but they are quite content. In the past, Nupur had even asked Arif to re-marry so he could have children, but he refused out of love for her, and to him, love was all that he really needed.















A Beautiful Rose Made of Paper

K. U. Masoud

“I look beautiful when I dress up. I feel like I am a pretty rose amongst other flowers today, but I am one that’s made of paper. I may look like a rose, but I will never have the same fragrance. It is my destiny, it is the most difficult truth I have had to accept, it makes me sad that I can never bear children.”

Sheela, a member of the *Hijra* community, was explaining her case of experiencing unease in accepting her gender, otherwise known as gender dysphoria; she identifies as a woman, but feels trapped in her male body. At first, when I met her, she felt a bit shy, but once I explained to her the purpose of the photo narrative, she became enthusiastic to tell her story. In the local accent of Mymensingh, Sheela started from the beginning:

“Being the youngest in my family, I was able to spend some years with my parents. As a child, I went to a primary school in the neighbourhood. I had a happy childhood and I loved going to school. As I went to a coeducational institute, my classroom had both boys and girls, but I always preferred to sit with the girls. The teachers liked me as well. During the school’s annual programmes, I participated in sports and dance competitions, and won prizes. I watched the dance programmes on T.V. and studied them very carefully. I hoped one day, to be as famous as those movie stars I saw on screen including like Rani Mukherjee and Divya Bharti.”







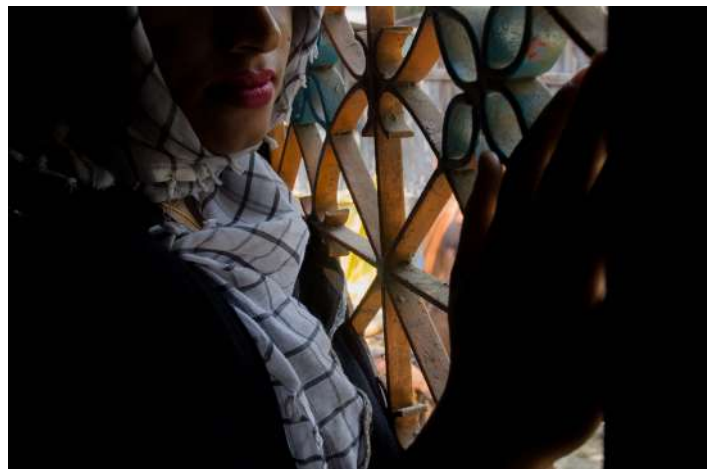


Today, Sheela follows her passion and works as a professional dancer. She works for private events such as birthday parties, weddings, and also as a back-up dancer in Bangla cinemas. She provides for both her mother and brother with her earnings. She loves to dress, talk, and act like a woman. However, she feels incomplete for not having a woman's body.

Sheela said she is growing wary of ageing; she realized that her profession is entirely dependent on her physical fitness and youth. She fears when she is older, she will no longer be hired to

dance, which will ultimately force her to switch to another line of work. She does not agree with the way most *hijras* earn money in Dhaka, which is to go around their neighbourhoods in groups, collecting and extorting money and food from people and other establishments. To her, it's no different from begging. She dreams of owning and running a beauty parlour in Dhaka, and she is already taking preparations by enrolling in training courses on hair styling and make-up.







PHOTOGRAPHERS' PROFILES



Md. Akhlas Uddin is a self-taught documentary photographer based in Sylhet. He has been working since 1995 and has completed several photography courses and workshops from Pathshala South Asian Media Academy and BRAC University. In addition, he is a member of the Sylhet Photographic Society (SPS) and was the former secretary and vice president of the organisation. He has received recognition for his works, some of which include The International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP) in 2010, and the EFIAP distinction in 2013. In addition, he was the recipient of the Prince Naris Award in Thailand in 2015, and the Xposure Photography Festival Award in 2016.



Momo Mustafa works as a staff photographer for New Age, an English newspaper based in Dhaka. Her two great passions are travelling and photography. Through her photographs, she wishes to share the beauty and diversity of her experiences. "Between taking courses and working, I travelled throughout the country, met new people and shared new experiences, which helped shape my beliefs and ideas. Documenting people, especially the vulnerable and disenfranchised, need more attention and care... It fascinates to me, how a simple click of a camera can capture a moment, which can take our breath away, time after time." She took a foundation course on photography at Chanchal Mahmood Photography and went on to finish a diploma course from Prism. Currently, she is taking another certification course at Pathshala South Asian Media Academy.



A.N.M. Zia is a self-taught freelance photographer from Sylhet. Working since 1996, he has taken part in numerous national and international photography competitions, and is currently serving as the Vice President of the Sylhet Photographic Society (SPS). He completed the "Telling the Story: An International Reportage Workshop" by Pathshala South Asian Media Academy in 2012, as well as the foundational course back in 2002. In addition, he holds a diploma course in Computer Information Studies and a two-year diploma course on Fine Art from the Sylhet Shilpakala Academy. In 2003, he organized and curated a solo photography and painting exhibition of his works at Shahid Suleman Hall in Sylhet. His works primarily focus on diverse social issues, lifestyles, rituals, and local cultures of Bangladesh.



K.U. Masoud is a professional photographer and an instructor based in Chittagong, Bangladesh. He started photography back in 1989, while studying at the Fine Arts department at Dhaka University. At present, he is associated with several organisations and institutions related to photography and hopes to contribute to the development and expansion of the field of photography in Bangladesh. He is interested in reflections on social disharmony expressed artistically, seen through the lens of his camera.



Snigdha Zaman is a staff photographer for New Age, a newspaper based in Dhaka. She received her photography certification from Pathshala South Asian Media Academy and finished her Bachelor of Arts from Eden University College in Dhaka. Over the years, Sanjida has participated in numerous photography exhibitions, including the international photo festival, Nooderlicht, which takes place in the Netherlands.



Hassan Bipul has been working as a copy editor for a Bangladeshi news agency for over eighteen years and as a photographer for nearly twelve. He joined BDnews24.com in 2009 as a coordinator for the Features department. Working as a freelance photographer for the development sector in Bangladesh, in 2010, he was selected as the representative from Bangladesh and participated in a documentary competition organized by the French agency Zeppelin Networks. His works have been published by The Guardian and USA Today, and some of his clients include BRAC, icddr,b, DFIF, Save the children, The British High Commission, TESCO, Asiatic JWT, and Alliance Française de Dhaka.



Nayeem Tushar is a documentary photographer based in Bangladesh. According to him, photography explains his thoughts, in both psychological and emotional basis; and it's a medium to express his emotion in the relationship with all belongings.



Mumit Mahbub became interested in photography after attending the photography exhibition "The War We Forgot" back in 2001. Soon after, he started taking courses at Pathshala South Asian Media Academy and began his journey as a documentary photographer. After completing his course at Pathshala, Mumit worked for two national newspapers for nearly 10 years. During this time, he travelled throughout the country, met new people and experienced diverse lives, which enriched both his beliefs and focus in photography. In recent years, photographing marginalised groups and peoples in Bangladesh has been Mumit's main focus. He believes that photography is a powerful tool that can be used to make society not only understand diversity and different ethnicities that exist in Bangladesh, but also appreciate these different cultures and incorporate it into their own lives.



Faiham Ebna Sharif is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Dhaka. He holds an Honour's and a Master's degree in international relations from Dhaka University, and a diploma in photography from Counter Foto. Currently, he is an adjunct faculty at the Department of Photography at Counter Foto. He contributes as a multimedia journalist at bdnews24.com, and is a fellow of "Dutch Visitors Program on Human Rights". Before taking up photography as a profession, Faiham worked as a reporter and newsroom editor in a national news TV channel. In addition, he has worked for international and local productions such as documentaries, feature films, and reality TV shows. He received the Magnum Foundation Fund and The Documentary Project Fund in 2017, for his project titled, *Story of Modern Bonded Labour: Tea Garden Workers of Bangladesh*. His other projects focus on people living with HIV, migration, and the film industry.



Humaira Sultana is currently working with Plan International Bangladesh. She holds a one-year foundation course diploma from Pathshala South Asian Media Academy. In 2016, she became interested in photography and took it up as a hobby. Later that year in December, she participated in a group show, which exhibited photographs focusing on violence against women. Humaira attempts to empathise with the people she photographs, especially the ones she met through the JPGSPH workshop. By placing herself in their shoes, Humaira believes photographs can shed light on people living through extreme hardships and help create awareness. With each photograph she takes, she hopes to give them the support they need, which will help bring significant changes to their lives.



Kiron Khan has been working as a freelance photographer and a photojournalist since 2005. He has had several publications, particularly with nature photography. In addition, he was awarded first prize in 2008 in a competition organized by the Dhaka Photography Institute and the Dhaka Photo Club, to celebrate world photography day. He was also awarded first prize in the NCI Photography Competition in 2014.



Sayed Latif Hossain is a self-taught photographer, graphic designer and writer. Taking photography from early childhood, he started as a professional freelance photographer from 1997. His works have been exhibited in a number of group exhibitions both in Bangladesh and abroad. His photographic interest and practice spans from documentary to street, commercial to editorial and experimental.

His works have been published in a variety of publications from reputed international NGOs, development agencies, magazines, newspapers both in Bangladesh and abroad. Being a popular trainer in photography, digital imaging and graphic design in Bangladesh, he provides workshops in these areas.

At present he is a lecturer and faculty member of Counter Foto – a Centre for visual arts in Bangladesh. He is also working as an independent development communications professional.



BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University

5th Floor (Level - 6), icddr,b Building

68 Shahid Tajuddin Ahmed Sharani, Mohakhali, Dhaka 1212, Bangladesh

Phone: 880-2-9827501-4 | Fax: 880-2-58810383 | Email: jpgsph@bracu.ac.bd | Website: www.bracjpgsph.org

Cover Photo: Mumit Mahbub

Funded by

